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Note on the Manufacture of Pottery in Assam.*

In my Note on the Manufacture of Brass and Copper Wares in Assam, I pointed out the almost entire absence in the Brahmaputra Valley of the lower professional castes which are found in other parts of India.†

Castes engaged in the manufacture.
(a) Bramaputra Valley.

In the later days of Ahom rule, artizans were introduced from outside, and efforts were made to induce the people to learn different handicrafts. Some of them did so, especially people of the Kalita, Kewat and Koch castes, and the occupations thus adopted were gradually becoming hereditary, and functional endogamous sub-castes were slowly being developed, when the annexation of the country put a stop to the process.

Thus, not only are there no regular professional castes engaged in the manufacture of pottery, brassware, &c., but the sub-castes who follow these occupations do not look on them as their only source of livelihood, and follow the ordinary agricultural avocations of the people, as well as the special handicraft which they have inherited from their ancestors.

There are two distinct classes of persons engaged in the manufacture of pottery in the Brahmaputra Valley, the Hirás and the Kumárs.‡ The former were originally Chandáls, and, of all the functional sub-castes, they approach most nearly to the position of a separate caste. There is, however, no doubt of their close connection with the Chandáls: they still intermarry with them; they eat food cooked by them; they have the same *Patit* or *Barna* Brahmans as their *Purohits*, and they have no scruples in the matter of selling fish themselves.

The word "Kumár," on the other hand, so far as the Brahmaputra Valley proper is concerned, is not used to denote persons of any particular caste or sub-caste, but is applied to persons of several different castes (chiefly the Kalita, Kewat, and Koch) who make, or whose ancestors are remembered to have made, articles of earthenware. Thus, there are Kumár Kalitas, Kumár Kewats, and Kumár Koches, and the people so designated continue to retain their old caste status.

Within the caste, they rank equally with persons belonging to other functional subdivisions (e.g., the Kámárs and Káshárs), but below those members of the caste whose occupation is said to have always been purely agricultural; the distinction, however, is by no means well marked amongst the Kéwats and Koches, and is not a very firm one,

* The subject prescribed for this year's monograph is pottery and glassware, but there is no manufacture of glassware in this province. I do not refer in this Note to the pottery made by the Assam Trading Company, because their business is still small, and their methods are European rather than Native.

† For a possible explanation of this circumstance, see the article on Kalitas in the last Provincial Census Report (page 210).

‡ The word "Kumár" is derived from "Kumbhakár" and means "maker of pots."

§ In Goálpara the Kumárs form a distinct caste, as in the Surma Valley.

738.3095411
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24198

even amongst the Kalitas in the western portion of the valley. A well-to-do Kumár Kalita of Kámrup or Mangaldai would have very little difficulty in obtaining a Bar Kalita bride, and his descendants would probably, in course of time, succeed in obtaining recognition as the equals of Kalitas who had never followed other than purely agricultural pursuits. Higher up the valley, it is said to be much more difficult for a Kumár Kalita to raise himself to the status of a Bar Kalita.

In a few rare instances, persons other than Hirás and Kumárs are found manufacturing earthen vessels in the Brahmaputra Valley. In the Tezpur subdivision a few Doms make large earthen pots, which are used for boiling *gur*; they rank equally with other Doms, and only make these utensils as a secondary occupation, their main means of livelihood being the catching and selling of fish. Near Dibrugarh, some few families of up-country men from Arrah are potters by profession. They are known locally as Hirá Kumárs. Some up-country potters have settled recently at Golághát.

2. In Sylhet and Cachar, the word "Kumár" denotes, what it does in Bengal, the separate potter caste, *i.e.*, one of the nine professional castes (Navasákha), which are said, according to the commonly-accepted Hindu tradition, to be descended from the offspring of Visvakarma, the divine artizan, by a Sudra woman. Members of the caste rank as Sudras, and Brahmans will take water from their hands and serve them as their priests. The Kumárs sometimes call themselves Rudrapál, in vindication of their claim to be descended from the beads of Mahádeva (*Rudráksha*). Some members of the caste go still further, and, dropping the Rudra, say that their proper appellation is Pál, or Káyastha.

Besides the Kumárs, there are in Sylhet some Musalman potters, locally known as Khuskis, who prepare the plates called *sának* for their co-religionists. The Khuskis are said to be endogamous; they are looked down on by ordinary Musalmans, just as are the Máhimals or Muhammadan fishermen.

3. In the Garo Hills, pottery is made by persons of the same caste as the Kumárs of Sylhet; in the Khási and Jaintia and the Nága Hills districts, the caste system is unknown, and there the business is carried on by any one choosing to learn the work.

In Manipur, the persons engaged in the manufacture of pottery are known as Luis, who are said to be the descendants of Kabui Nágas. Their status is below that of ordinary Manipuris, but there is no perceptible difference in their habits or manner of life.

4. The articles manufactured in this province are not of any special interest, and consist chiefly of the rough utensils in common daily use amongst the people.

Articles manufactured. A list of the more important articles made is given in the Appendix.

5. The earth used is generally a glutinous clay (*áthá máti* or *álatiyá máti*), but information on this point is not very precise or satisfactory. Earth used. That used by the Kumárs of the Brahmaputra Valley is of a dark-blue colour, and is known as *kumár máti*; it is procurable without much difficulty in most parts of the country,—usually on the banks of streams. The Hirás use a peculiar kind of clay, which is more rare, and it is reported that in the whole of the Kámrup district, there are only two places (Molong and Agiathuli) from which it can be obtained. This clay, which is called *hirá máti*, is of a gray colour, and is very stiff; owing to this fact it makes better earthenware than the *kumár máti*, but the Kumárs do not use it, as it is not easily worked into shape on the wheel.* The up-country potters of Dibrugarh are said to get their earth from ant-hills (*háphalu*).

* The Kumárs sometimes use it mixed with *kumár máti* for making well rings, which are shaped, not on the potter's wheel, but on a form.

In the Surma Valley and the Gáro Hills, the earth used is generally known as *murha* or *atháli máti*, i.e., a stiff clay, but for some utensils, which do not require any very great strength, a lighter kind of clay, called *káli máti*, is made use of.

The potters of the Jaintia Hills use two kinds of clay mixed,—one is of a dark-blue colour (*khyndew-iong*) and the other grayish (*khyndew-khluid*); these clays seem to correspond closely with the *kumár máti* and the *hirá máti* of the Brahmaputra Valley. The Nágas use a bluish-black earth, called in Angami Nága *khegsá*, which is probably the same as *kumár máti*. In Manipur, as in the Khási and Jaintia Hills, two kinds of clay are mixed. One of these is black, and is called by the Manipuris *leitúl*, and the other is of a light-red colour, and is known as *leicheng*; four parts of the former are used to one part of the latter.

6. The clay is in all cases first well moistened in water, and all extraneous substances are carefully removed. Where two different kinds of clay are combined, they are mixed together very carefully. If the clay is of a very stiff nature, a certain amount of clean coarse sand is worked up with it.* In some cases, the pieces of old utensils powdered up, ashes, paddy husks, or some sort of fibre chopped up into small pieces, are mixed with the clay to add to the strength of the utensils made from it. In all cases, the clay is thoroughly broken and worked up, the feet being largely used in the process.

7. The Kumárs of both valleys use the potter's wheel for roughly shaping all the articles made by them, except well rings and flat or saucer-like utensils. A moistened and well-kneaded lump of clay is placed on the inner disc of the wheel, which is fixed horizontally, and is made to rotate rapidly. As the wheel revolves, the workman moves the lump of clay about on the disc, and gives it the desired shape. The superfluous clay is then cut off with a string†, and the vessel is sun-dried for a time. When it has somewhat hardened, it is placed in a hollow mould made of wood or earthenware, which is sprinkled with sand to prevent the vessel from sticking to it, and is then made to assume its final shape by hand. The method adopted is to beat the exterior surface of the vessel with a flat wooden or earthenware mallet, held in the right hand, against a smooth, oval-shaped stone held by the left hand against the inner surface. When the required shape has been given to the vessel, it is again sun-dried, and the surface is then polished with a sort of earthenware pestle or (in Manipur) a piece of strong rag folded and moistened with water.

They are then sometimes coloured with red dust or cattle urine, after which they are ready for the kiln.‡ Flat articles made by Kumárs, such as plates, &c., and all utensils manufactured by the Hirás of the Brahmaputra Valley and the potters of the Khási and Jaintia and Nága Hills districts and Manipur, are roughly moulded on a flat disc of wood, and not on the wheel. The subsequent operations are the same as those already described. In the case of articles with narrow necks made by the Hirás, the practice is to make them in successive layers, each layer being partially dried before the next is added.

It may be noted here that as sun is required for drying the articles before they are burnt in the kiln, the cold weather is the most favourable season for the work.

* One object of adding the sand is said to be in order to prevent the articles made from cracking when being burnt in the kiln.

† From its supposed resemblance to a navel string, the Kumárs of the Brahmaputra Valley are nicknamed *Nári kátá Kumárs*.

‡ In the Khási and Jaintia Hills the colour is given by a decoction made from the wild date pine after the vessels have been taken out of the kiln, and while they are still hot.

Implements used.

8. The following is a list of the rough implements used, with a description of each :

(1) *The potter's wheel—*

| | | | | | | |
|----------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|--------------|
| Assamese | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | <i>chák.</i> |
| Bengali | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | <i>chák.</i> |

The diameter of the whole wheel is usually rather more than 3 feet. In the centre is a solid disc of tamarind or some other hard wood, some 13 inches in diameter, to which the outer rim is joined by four wooden spokes, each of which is about 6 inches in length. The outer rim, which is about 6 inches broad, is made of split bamboos, bound with cane and covered with a thick plaster of clay mixed with fibres of the sago palm (*cháur*); the object of this rim is to increase the weight of the wheel and thereby add to its momentum when in motion. An upright piece of *Nágeswar* wood (*Mesua ferrea*) or *khair* (*Acacia catechu*), about 6 inches in length, supports the wheel; it is fixed firmly in the ground and is pointed at the upper end, so as to enable the wheel to revolve on it freely; a hollowed-out stone is let into the centre of the disc, where it rests on the point, so as to reduce the friction to a minimum. As already stated, the wheel is worked by hand, and revolves horizontally, the clay to be moulded being worked into shape on the disc as the wheel rotates. The earth under the wheel is generally scooped away, so that the upper surface of the wheel may be on a level with the ground, on which the operator sits.

(2) *The rolling board—*

| | | | | | | |
|----------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|----------------|
| Assamese | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | <i>áphari.</i> |
| Bengali | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | <i>áthál.</i> |
| Manipuri | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | <i>kangoi.</i> |

A flat board, or earthenware tray, on which utensils are roughly shaped when the wheel is not used.

(3) *The mould—*

| | | | | | | |
|----------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|----------------|
| Assamese | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | <i>atháli.</i> |
| Bengali | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | <i>atháli.</i> |

A hollow sort of basin made of earthenware, about 16 inches long and $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches deep, in which the final shape is given to all articles of earthenware, whether originally shaped on the wheel or on the rolling board.

(4) *The mallet—*

| | | | | | | |
|----------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----------------------|
| Assamese | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | <i>baliya pitení.</i> |
| Bengali | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | <i>baila.</i> |
| Khási | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | <i>tyrnem.</i> |
| Manipuri | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | <i>khuyaijei.</i> |
| Nága | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | <i>jivü</i> |

From 6 to 12 inches in length, used for beating the clay into its final shape against a stone held on the other side. It is made either of wood, stone, or earthenware. This implement is sometimes also used when kneading the clay before working it into shape.

(5) *The polisher—*

| | | | | | | |
|----------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|---------------|
| Assamese | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | <i>cháki.</i> |
| Bengali | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | <i>cháki.</i> |

Used for polishing the articles made, after they have attained their final shape and been partially dried.

(6) *The kiln—*

| | | | | | | |
|----------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----------------|
| Assamese | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | <i>págháli.</i> |
| Bengali | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | <i>pain.</i> |

This is used by the Kumárs of the Surma Valley, and by some of those of the Brahmaputra Valley.

The Hirás and others burn their earthenware in the open. In both cases alike, the vessels are carefully stacked, with layers of straw between them, and firewood or cow-dung as fuel underneath. In the Brahmaputra Valley a stack of utensils is called a *thupá*.

9. The collection of the clay and firewood, the stacking of the utensils in the kiln or *thupá*, and the rough shaping of utensils on the wheel, form the men's portion of the work. The final shaping and polishing of the utensils is always done by the women, and when the wheel is not used, as with the Hirás, the rough moulding is also done by them.

10. The general opinion of the officers consulted is that the profits of the business are very small, the average earnings being placed at from Rs. 4 to Rs. 6 a month. It is difficult to estimate the exact earnings, as no accounts are kept by the potters, and they generally prefer to barter their wares in exchange for rice or paddy, instead of selling them for a fixed price. There is, however, no doubt that the earnings are less than they were some years ago. Brass cooking utensils are cheaper than they were formerly, and the standard of comfort of the people is improving, so that brass vessels are in most parts supplanting those made of clay. In Sylhet, the better class of Musalmans are taking to china instead of earthenware, and throughout the province, tin lamps and kerosine oil are taking the place of earthen *cháki*s and mustard oil. Owing to these causes, the demand for earthenware articles is gradually falling off, while the trade is also depressed by the competition of foreign wares of a better quality, which are brought up in large quantities from Eastern Bengal, and more especially from the Dacca district. The decadence of the industry is not much to be regretted, as the articles made are of a very rough character and less durable than those imported from Bengal, and the people who make them in this province are not inclined to learn improved methods.

E. A. GAIT.

Dated the 15th March 1895.

Director of Land Records and Agriculture, Assam.

APPENDIX.

List of the more important Earthenware Articles manufactured in Assam.

| Name of article | Description. | Price. | Remarks. |
|-------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|--|
| (a) BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY. | | | |
| Adkalal | Small <i>kalah</i> | 1 pice each | The same as the <i>hachi</i> of the Surma Valley. |
| Akasbāti | Lamps used at marriages and on other festive occasions, e.g., at the Dewāli festival. | 1 pice for 15 to 20. | |
| Akathia | Cooking pots, same as <i>chālā</i> , but smaller in size; used for cooking rice or curry. | 3 pice each. | |
| Barmālā | A <i>mālā</i> (vessel) with a rim, in which curries, sugar, &c., are kept. | 1 pice to 1 anna each. | |
| Dhureki | Same as <i>mālā</i> , but smaller in size; used for storing grain. | 2 pice to 2 annas each. | |
| Chākali or Pāicharu | These vessels are used for cooking curry. The difference between a <i>chālā</i> and <i>chākā</i> is that the former is hollow, while the latter is less so, and flatter. | 1 anna to 2 annas each. | |
| Chālā | An earthenware lamp, with an opening on which the wick lies. Mustard oil is usually burnt in the <i>chālā</i> . | 1 pice for 10 to 20. | The same as the <i>chālā</i> of the Surma Valley. |
| Charakādin | A hollow cylinder, about 20 inches high, used as a candlestick. | 1 anna each | The same as the <i>bogun</i> or <i>prāñipargādi</i> of the Surma Valley. |
| Chilim | These are of two kinds, viz., <i>dhāt-khōā chilim</i> and <i>bhāng-khōā chilim</i> . The one is used for smoking tobacco and the other for <i>ganja</i> . The two are slightly different in shape at the top. The <i>chilims</i> used for smoking tobacco are larger than those used for smoking <i>ganja</i> . | 1 pice for two | The same as the <i>kalki</i> of the Surma Valley. |
| Charu | Same as <i>thālā</i> , but of medium size; used for cooking rice. They are in use among the poorer classes who cannot afford to buy iron or brass utensils. | 1 to 2 pice each. | |
| Damā or Dabā | Earthen rings, on which hides are fastened to make drums. | 2 annas to 4 annas each. | |
| Daskathia | Used for cooking rice, and intended to hold food for three or four persons. | 1 anna each. | |
| Gachā | A lamp-stand | 2 pice each. | |
| Ghat | Water-pots used in <i>pujas</i> | 4 annas to 2 rupees 8 annas each. | The same as the <i>ghat</i> of the Surma Valley. |
| Hāndi or Hāri | A wide-mouthed pot. It is largely used by Kachāris for cooking rice and brewing <i>mad</i> . | 3 pice to one anna each. | The same as the <i>pātil</i> of the Surma Valley. |
| Jangā | Somewhat similar in shape to the <i>hāndi</i> , but longer. It is used by Kachāris for keeping water and <i>mad</i> . | 4 to 5 rupees each. | |
| Juidharā | Fire-stove | 4 to 5 pice each. | |
| Kalah | A decanter-shaped vessel, chiefly used for holding water. Also used for holding milk, <i>gur</i> (molasses), oil, &c. The capacity is from 4 to 5 gallons. | 2 pice to 1 anna each. | The same as the <i>kalah</i> of the Surma Valley. |
| Khāmp̄ti Hāria | Manufactured after a model given by the Khāmp̄tis for cooking their rice over steam. It is a drum-shaped pot, perforated at the base, and placed over another basin in which the water is boiled. | 2 pice each. | |

| Name of article. | Description. | Price. | Remarks. |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|---|
| (a) BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY—continued. | | | |
| Kholá ... | ... Resembles in shape a <i>kalah</i> , with this distinction that it has a wider mouth and neck, and is not quite so high. This vessel is generally used for cooking rice. | 1 anna to 6 pice each, according to size. | |
| Malá ... | ... A small <i>charu</i> used in religious ceremonies. | 1 pice each | The same as the <i>málsá</i> of the Surma Valley. |
| Malá Charu | ... Small trays for distributing eatables during festivals. | 1 pice to 1 anna each. | |
| Máthia | ... A large oval-shaped pot, with a comparatively narrow mouth, used for storing grain and sometimes as a box in which clothes are kept. When used for the latter purpose, the mouth is closed by a cover, which is pasted over it. | 8 annas to 12 annas each. | |
| Mridanga or Khol | ... Drums, larger than the <i>dumá</i> , but made in the same way. | 3 rupees to 4 rupees each. | |
| Nád pát | ... Well ring | 6 annas to 12 annas each. | The same as the <i>pát</i> of the Surma Valley |
| Nadia ... | ... A basin, something like a <i>charu</i> but has a rim, and is stronger; used for keeping sweetmeats in. | 4 annas to 2 rupees each. | |
| Nágára | ... Small drum | 12 annas each. | |
| Phuldán | ... Flower vase | 1 rupee to 8 annas each. | |
| Piála, Beria or Deg... | Is a shallow " <i>kholá</i> ," with a much wider mouth. The neck is shorter than that of a " <i>khol</i> ." It is used for cooking purposes, as well as for keeping curds, soft, or molasses, &c. | 1 anna each. | |
| Sátar ... | ... Same as <i>deskithia</i> and <i>akithia</i> , holding food for one person only. | 2 pice each, | |
| Sarai ... | ... A kind of tray on which presents are offered | 1 rupee each. | |
| Tekeli or Bhetuá | ... The same shape as the <i>kalah</i> , but much smaller. Holds from two to four quares. | 2 for 1 pice. | |
| Thili ... | ... Big pots for preparing molasses, and also used for storing up water and cooking food in feasts. | 8 annas each. | |

(b) SURMA VALLEY AND GARO HILLS.

| | | | |
|-------------------------|---|---------------|---|
| Badká | ... A small jug used by Muhammadans instead of a <i>lotá</i> . | 2 pice each. | |
| Bhetuá | ... Small earthen pot, used for cooking and other purposes. | 4 for 1 pice. | |
| Bogná or pradiperguchá. | Stand for <i>chátá</i> | 1 pice each | The same as the <i>charakdán</i> of the Assam Valley. |
| Chátá or malliká | Open lamp | 12 for 1 pice | The same as the <i>chúki</i> of the Assam Valley. |
| Chilim or kalki | Used for smoking purposes | 5 for 1 pice | The same as the <i>chilim</i> of the Assam Valley. |
| Dfákná | ... A kind of plate or cover | 2 for 1 pice. | |
| Galás | ... A cup to drink out of | 2 for 1 pice. | |
| Ghát | ... Small pot for holding water, also used in Hindu ceremonies. | 1 pice each | The same as the <i>ghat</i> of the Assam Valley. |
| Hachi | ... Small <i>kalas</i> | 2 pice each | The same as the <i>ádkalah</i> of the Assam Valley. |

| Name of article. | Description. | Price. | Remarks. |
|------------------|--------------|--------|----------|
|------------------|--------------|--------|----------|

SURMA VALLEY AND GARO HILLS—*continued.*

| | | | |
|---------------|---|--------------------|---|
| Kalas | ... A large jug for carrying water | ... 2 pice each | ... The same as the <i>kalah</i> of the Assam Valley. |
| Káslá or Dema | ... Big earthen pot, used for cooking and other purposes. | 2 pice each. | |
| Kási or Kái | ... A large plate | ... 2 for 1 pice. | |
| Khádá | ... A kind of cup | ... 1 pice each. | |
| Málsá | ... A kind of cup | ... 2 for 1 pice | ... The same as the <i>málá</i> of the Assam Valley. |
| Pát | ... Well ring | ... 5 for 1 rupee | ... The same as the <i>nád pát</i> of the Assam Valley. |
| Pátl | ... Small pot used for cooking and other purposes. | 1 anna each | ... The same as the <i>hóndi</i> of the Assam Valley. |
| Pála | ... Cup | ... 2 for 1 pice. | |
| Sharáh | ... A kind of plate used as a cover | ... 4 for 1 pice. | |
| Sának | ... A kind of plate used chiefly by Muhammadans to eat rice on. | 3 for 1 pice. | |
| Sárai | ... A kind of jug for holding water | ... 4 annas each. | |
| Tari | ... A small plate | ... 10 for 1 pice. | |

NAGA HILLS.

| | | | |
|---------|--|-----------------------------------|--|
| L | ... This is the same in shape as the <i>likuno</i> , but larger, and is used chiefly for cooking rice. | 2 to 4 annas each. | |
| Likphu | ... This resembles a vase in shape, with a long contracted neck, terminating at the mouth in a fairly broad lip or flange. It is only used to carry water into the village. It ranges from 18 inches to 2 feet in height, and from 9 to 12 inches in diameter. | 6 annas to 12 annas each. | |
| Liki | ... This is of the same shape as the <i>Likphu</i> , but larger. It is used only for the preparation of rice beer or ' <i>zu</i> .' | 12 annas to 1 rupee 8 annas each. | |
| Likuno | ... This is about the size and shape of the ordinary brass <i>loti</i> , but having proportionately a larger mouth. It is used for cooking vegetables, &c. | 1 anna to 2 annas each. | |
| Setuli | ... A kind of earthen <i>kordí</i> , used for roasting seeds, measuring from 10 to 20 inches in diameter. | 4 annas to 8 annas each. | |
| Tatseli | ... This is of the same shape as <i>li</i> , only larger in size, some being as much as 18 inches in height and of about the same diameter. | 6 annas to 12 annas each. | |

| Name of article, | Description, | Price. | Remarks, |
|-----------------------------|---|------------------------------|----------|
| (d) KHASI AND JANTIA HILLS. | | | |
| Khewranei | ... <i>Chattis</i> or <i>gharas</i> ... | ... 2 pice to 4 annas each. | |
| Khew syntiv. | ... Flower pots ... | ... 2 annas to 4 annas each. | |
| Rum... | .. <i>Gharas</i> ... | ... 4 annas to 6 annas each. | |

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